

# The taxonomic position of the Somali courser *Cursorius (cursor) somalensis*

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The nominate race of the Cream-coloured Courser *Cursorius cursor* breeds in North Africa and the Middle East and on Socotra. It winters in the Sahara, and south to the Gambia, Mali, Chad, central Sudan, northern Ethiopia and Eritrea, and has occurred in Somalia (mainly the northwest: Ash & Miskell 1983) and northern Kenya (Shekerman & van Wetten 1987). A similarly patterned but smaller courser is resident on arid plains in eastern Ethiopia, Somalia and northern and eastern Kenya (for distribution see Fig. 1). Two races are involved, *somalensis* Shelley 1885 in Ethiopia and northern Somalia, and the slightly darker *littoralis* Erlanger 1905 in southern Somalia and Kenya. These were described as races of the Cream-coloured Courser, under the systematic

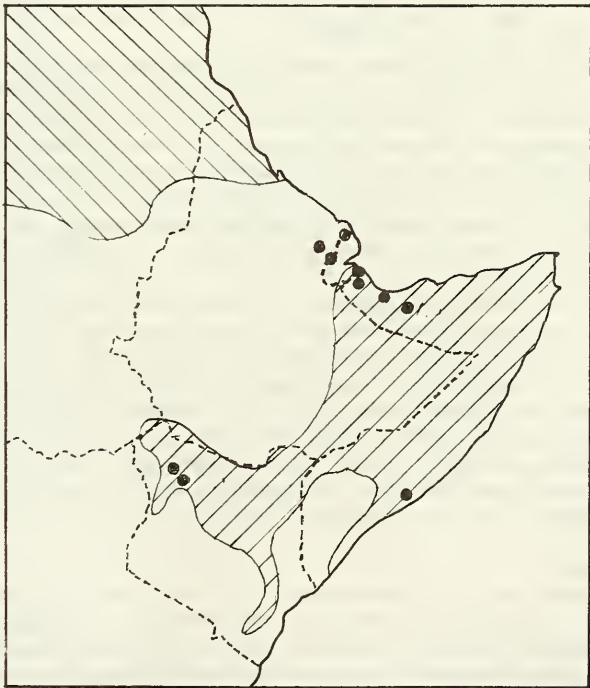


Figure 1. Distribution of *Cursorius c. cursor* (hatched area top left) and *Cursorius (c.) somalensis* (hatched area centre right) in east Africa. ●: isolated southern records of *C. c. cursor*.

TABLE 1

Comparisons of wing, tarsus and culmen lengths (range and mean, mm) in four taxa of coursers (*Cursorius s. somalensis*, *C. s. littoralis*, *C. c. cursor* and *C. rufus*)

		<i>n</i>	Wing	Tarsus	Culmen
<i>somalensis</i>	M	8	131–139 (134.8)	52–60 (55.8)	21–24 (23.0)
	F	4	129–135 (132.3)	52–56 (54.0)	23–25 (23.8)
<i>littoralis</i>	M	2	124, 137	49, 52	24, 23
	F	3	133–140 (135.7)	53–59 (55.3)	23–26 (24.3)
	MF	6	124–140 (134.0)	52–59 (53.5)	23–26 (24.0)
<i>c. cursor</i>	M	7	152–163 (157.6)	53–59 (55.7)	22–26 (23.7)
	F	5	151–160 (155.8)	51–57 (53.8)	22–25 (23.6)
<i>rufus</i>	M	5	136–143 (139.2)	47–49 (47.6)	20–21 (20.6)
	F	6	131–138 (135.3)	44–48 (47.0)	20–21 (20.7)

name *C. gallicus* (over which *cursor* Latham has precedence; see *Ibis* 1923, p. 429), but were subsequently regarded by some authors (e.g. van Someren 1922) as comprising an endemic east African species *C. somalensis*. More recently, they have usually been treated as races of *C. cursor* (see e.g. Vaurie 1962, Snow 1978, Britton 1980, Cramp & Simmons 1983, Urban *et al.* 1986).

Hayman *et al.* (1985) drew attention to several points of difference between *somalensis* (and *littoralis*) and Palearctic *C. cursor*. At the same time, they pointed out resemblances of size, underwing pattern and juvenile plumage to Burchell's Courser *C. rufus* of southern Africa, and they chose to treat the east African form under this species rather than under *cursor*. It should be mentioned here that *C. cursor* and *C. rufus* share the same head and crown pattern, and have in fact sometimes been combined as a single species (e.g. White 1962). But such lumping seems inappropriate, for the two differ considerably in their adult and juvenile plumages, and their ranges are far apart.

We have examined *somalensis* and *littoralis* specimens in the British Museum collection, and compared measurements and plumage patterns with those of *C. c. cursor* and *C. rufus*. The results of these comparisons are detailed below. While we agree with Hayman *et al.* that the east African forms should be regarded as specifically distinct from *C. cursor*, we do not recommend combining them with *C. rufus*. Instead, we propose that they be treated as races of an endemic east African species *Cursorius somalensis* (Shelley 1885).

### Measurements

Wing, tarsus and bill measurements of four taxa are compared in Table 1. In wing-length, *somalensis* and *littoralis* are similar to *rufus*, but considerably smaller than *cursor*. Structurally, however, they differ from both *cursor* and *rufus* in having relatively longer legs and a longer bill. In flight, their feet project much further beyond the tail than in either *cursor* or *rufus*, a feature illustrated in Hayman *et al.* (1985, Plate 18).

### Adult plumage

Head and body: The head and crown patterns of the forms considered here are very similar. White superciliary stripes extend back to meet around the nape. These are bordered below by narrow black post-ocular lines, while the crown is tawny or rufous in front and grey behind. The upperparts of *somalensis* are pale tawny brown, those of *littoralis* slightly darker brown. Both are less pale and less sandy above than *cursor*, but paler and less richly tawny than *rufus*. Below, the east African birds are pale brown, grading to whitish on the lower belly and crissum, similar in pattern to *cursor*. They differ from *rufus*, in which a blackish band separates a clear white lower belly and crissum from a bright tawny chest and upper belly. The underparts of *rufus* are in fact more like those of the Indian *C. chalconotus* and the smaller Afrotropical *C. temminckii*, which have a similar head pattern, although with a wholly rufous crown.

Upperwing: The east African forms resemble *cursor* in having a plain innerwing and contrasting black outerwing, with only a very narrow whitish trailing edge to pale secondaries. *C. rufus* is more patterned, and has darker grey secondaries, with a broad white bar along the trailing edge. These differences are illustrated on Plate 18 of Hayman *et al.* (*op. cit.*).

Underwing: In *cursor* the underwing appears all dark. The coverts, axillaries and secondaries are jet black with only a narrow whitish bar along the secondary tips. In *somalensis* and *littoralis* the pattern is quite different. The coverts and axillaries are pale grey-brown, so that a pale innerwing contrasts with a blackish outerwing. The secondaries are greyish with a narrow whitish bar along the trailing edge. In *rufus*, black is confined to the outerwing (as in *somalensis*), but the innerwing pattern is rather different, for brown wing linings and axillaries contrast with dusky greater coverts, and the secondaries are mainly white. The underwing patterns of *somalensis*, *cursor* and *rufus* are compared in Figure 2a.

Tail: The upper tail pattern of *somalensis* and *littoralis* differs from that of both *cursor* and *rufus* (Fig. 2b). The feathers are mainly pale brown, with a dusky subterminal area on the central feather (t1), more distinct and broader blackish tips to the remaining feathers, and white confined to the distal part of the outer web of the outer feather (t6) and the sides of the tip of t5. In *cursor*, t1 is plain sandy-buff. The remaining feathers resemble those of *somalensis*, but the blackish bars are narrower and subterminal. *C. rufus* has a dusky subterminal mark on t1 like *somalensis*, but the feather bases are greyer. There is much more pure white at the tips of t3 to t5, and t6 is almost wholly white.

### Juvenile plumage

The juvenile plumage of *somalensis* and *littoralis* bears a stronger resemblance to that of *rufus* than to *cursor*. The upperparts are strongly blotched and barred with dark brown, whereas in *cursor* they are only finely barred and generally much paler. In *somalensis*, the distal half of the tail is barred, whereas in *cursor* it is plain apart from fine

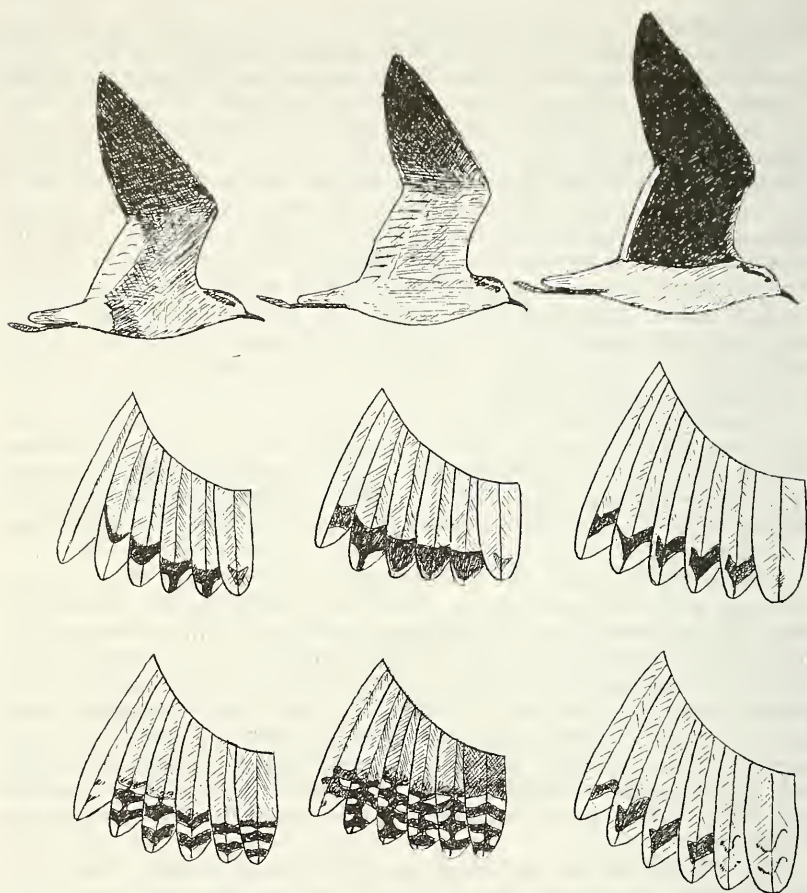


Figure 2. A comparison of *Cursorius rufus* (left), *C. somalensis* (centre) and *C. cursor* (right): top, adult underwing; middle, adult uppertail; bottom, juvenile uppertail.

subterminal lines on t1 and t2 and a single broad dark subterminal mark on t3–t6. In *rufus*, barring is more confined to the tail tip and is absent from t6 (Fig. 2c), and the general colour of the tail is greyer than in *somalensis*. Underwing patterns differ between juveniles of these forms in much the same way as between adults (see Hayman *et al.*, p. 250).

### Discussion

The similarities and differences between *somalensis* (including *littoralis*), *cursor* and *rufus* may be summarised as follows:

1. Adults of all three share the same head and crown pattern and have plain uppertails.



2. Adults of *somalensis* and *cursor* have similar plain underparts, while *rufus* has a black band across the belly.
3. Adults of *somalensis* and *cursor* have a similar upperwing pattern, while that of *rufus* is obviously different.
4. All three have a different adult tail pattern.
5. All three have a different underwing pattern, but that of *cursor* is most distinct.
6. Juveniles of *somalensis* and *rufus* have a similar, strongly barred body plumage, while those of *cursor* are paler and plainer.
7. All three have a different juvenile tail pattern, but tails of *somalensis* and *rufus* are both barred.
8. *C. rufus* and *somalensis* are about the same size, while *cursor* is considerably larger.
9. *C. cursor* and *rufus* are similarly proportioned, while *somalensis* has relatively longer legs and bill.

Thus, *somalensis* differs structurally from both *cursor* and *rufus*. Its pale underwing is quite unlike that of *cursor*, while its plain adult belly differs markedly from that of *rufus*. In details of adult and juvenile wing and tail pattern it is also quite distinct from the Palearctic and southern African birds. In our view it should be recognised as a separate species.

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